West Coast Story

By George Nicholson

Land of Adventure

The West Coast of Vancouver Island is rich in history and adventure. There are interesting stories connected with the place names.

UCHUCKLESIT, the name of a small inlet on the west side of Barkley Sound, near to where it narrows to about a mile in width, is derived from the Indian word, "how-chuck-les-ahts," meaning "people who live by a spring situated on or at the head of a deep inlet."

Somass, the Indian name of the river which flows into the sea at Alberni, means "a creek flowing over or down an embankment."

The name was evidently appropriate to its upper reaches, where there are numerous falls. One is Stamp Falls, on Stamp River, a tributary of the Somass and named after Captain Edward Stamp, who, in 1860, established and managed a sawmill at the head of Alberni Inlet. The site of the mill was at the foot of what is now Argyle Street, Port Alberni, then covered by standing timber, with the Indian village of "Toh-a-muk-is" on the waterfront.

The mill was destroyed by fire in 1869, but in the intervening years lumber and spars had been shipped to Australia, Hawaii, China, Manila, South America, San Francisco and London. Out of nearly 100 ships which took these cargoes, only one was a steamer, the Japanese tramp Fusi Yama, 994 tons, destined for Shanghai.

BARKLEY SOUND was discovered and named in 1787 by Captain Charles William Barkley, of the British trading vessel Imperial Eagle, formerly the East Indiaman, Loudoun. Alberni Inlet, until recently known as the Alberni Canal, was named in 1791 by Lieutenant Francisco Eliza, after Don Pedro Alberni, a Spanish infantry brigade captain who was in command of the soldiers in Eliza's expedition, sent by the Viceroy of Mexico to occupy this part of the coast, with headquarters in Nootka.

It is interesting to note that, in the winter of 1861-1862, Alberni Inlet was frozen over throughout its entire length, approximately 26 miles. This hasn't occurred since.

Together, sound and inlet, they form by far the largest body of inland water on the west coast of Vancouver Island, which almost cuts the island in two, leaving only a 10-mile strip of land between Alberni and Qualicum.

SPROAT LAKE, one of the sources of the Somass River, was named in 1864 by Dr. Robert Brown, commander of the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition, after Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, who succeeded Stamp as manager of the sawmill and was later appointed government agent, customs officer, justice of the peace and coroner at Alberni by Governor Douglas.

The Indian name for Sproat Lake is "Kleecoot" (now the name of its post office), meaning "like the head of a salmon split open and spread out."

Dr. Brown also named Franklin River, which flows into Alberni Inlet on the east side, about 10 miles from Port Alberni, after Selim Franklin, a Victoria auctioneer and chairman of the committee (in B.C.) which sponsored the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition.

NAHMINT LAKE, and the river of the same name which connects it with the inlet, on the west side, about six miles below Franklin River, were named by John Buttle (Buttle Lake), the expedition's naturalist, after the Nah-mint Indians who resided in the neighborhood. Nahmint River is famous for its steelhead fishing, and the bay at its mouth, for tyees.

HENDERSON LAKE, which drains into Uchucklesit Inlet, was named by Dr. Brown after Captain John Henderson, who, in 1860, brought out to this coast from England the composite barquentine Woodpecker. She had nine passengers, which brought the population of Alberni up to 40. In her hold was the machinery for the Alberni sawmill company. The Woodpecker, the property of the company, was afterwards wrecked on Peacock Bar at the mouth of the Columbia River, a total loss, but the crew was saved.

Captain Henderson then took command of the 78-foot schooner Alberni, built by the sawmill company in 1862 at Alberni, the third vessel built years later, was taken to the Hawaiian Islands, sold and converted into a whaler.

NOW HOLD YOUR BREATH. The annual rainfall at Henderson Lake is 263 inches: the highest recorded anywhere in Canada, and probably the North American continent.

That's no fairy tale. The records were kept by the superintendent of a fish hatchery which the department of fisheries maintained there for 25 years. It was closed in 1932, along with several other hatcheries.

Kildonan, a small white settlement, is on Uchucklesit Inlet. Its inhabitants are mostly employees of the local cannery.

During the years between 1925 and 1944, when pilchards (a fish a little bigger than a herring) were plentiful on the West Coast, there were no less than six reduction plants on Barkley Sound. But for some mysterious reason, which has never been explained, the pilchards suddenly disappeared and there hasn't been one seen since. Now there are no plants. Herring, and all species of salmon, are, however, still taken in large numbers.

Two large inlets, both uninhabited, extend deep into the mountains on the north side of the sound. One is Effingham Inlet, named by Captain John Meares, in the trading vessel Felice, July, 1788, in honor of the Right Hon. Thomas Howard, third Earl of Effingham, deputy marshal of England. Meares anchored here when returning in the Felice from trading along the coast southward of Nootka.

The other is Pipestem, obviously named from its shape. It was in this inlet, in 1925, that the minesweeper HMCS Armentieres struck an unchartered rock and sank; not far from where her sister ship HMCS Thiepval sank five years later. The Armentieries was subsequently refloated, but the Thiepval is still there.

It is said that at the time the Armentieres was playing a hide-and-seek game with a sunpected rum-runner. The navy never admitted this, but it was known that Barkley Sound, with its inlets and hundreds of small islands, provided a haven for the rum-running schooners. Liquor cargoes were sometimes cached there. Occasionally one was found by the authorities and confiscated.

THE FIRST WHALING station on the West Coast was at Sechart, on a small island at the entrance to Pipestem Inlet. It was abandoned 40 years ago, when these mammals became scarce.

The entrance to the sound is about 15 miles wide. It is studded with small islands and comprises three main channels of navigation. Barkley named all three. The west channel Loudoun, the former name of his ship, the Imperial Eagle; the middle channel Imperial Eagle, and the one to the east Trevor, his wife's maiden name. The latter permits clair sailing up to Port Alberni and is the one ocean-going ships use. The largest single group of islands, numbering about 50, some several miles square, and all named, is known as Broken Group. None is inhabited.

Like sentinels guarding the entrance, are the lighthouse at Amphitrite Point to the west, and Cape Beale to the east. In the shelter of the former is Ucluelet, a prosperous settlement whose inhabitants (approximately 600) mostly engage in fishing and logging. The name was adopted by Captain Richards, in HM surveying vessel Hecate, and is an abbreviation of the Indian word "Yu-clutl-ahts," meaning "people with a safe landing place (for their canoes)."

Amphitrite Point was also named by Richards, then in the Plumper, 1859, after HM Frigate Amphitrite, 24 guns, 1,064 tons, on this station 1851-1857. In Greek mythology, Amphitrite was King Neptune's wife, who, as such, was the supreme goddess of the seas. Here, the name is appropriate, for the passage is treacherous and difficult to navigate in bad weather, and it often requires more than a stout heart and a good engine to bring the little fishing boats safely home.

Cape Beale was named by Barkley, after John Beale, his purser, who, was Miller, the Imperial Eagle's second mate, and the whole of a boat's crew, was killed by the Indians in a small river near Destruction Island, south of Cape Flattery. The island was so named by Barkley from this fact.

BANFIELD INLET (not spelt with an "m") is about five miles in from Cape Beale. Prior to the coast being re-surveyed in 1932, it was known as Banfield Creek. The "m" was erroneously used when a post office was established there.

The inlet was named after W. E. Banfield, who in 1846, came out to this coast as ship's carpenter in HMS Constance. He left the service in 1849 and for several years traded among the sound Indians, living latterly at this inlet, and thus it became known by his name. Banfield lost his life under mysterious circumstances on Oct. 20, 1862. He was first reported, by an Indian, to have drowned when going out by canoe to meet the schooner Alberni, which was expected; and later, that he had been killed by an Indian on shore. An Ohyaht Indian, charged with his murder, was tried at Victoria in November, 1864, and acquitted for lack of evidence. When this Indian returned to Barkley Sound, he openly boasted that he had killed Banfield.

Banfield, which takes its name from the inlet, is a fishing settlement with a population of approximately 200. It is the site of a Red Cross outpost hospital, and one of two live-saving stations maintained on the West Coast by the department of transport. The other is at Tofino. Each has a six-man-crew, 40-foot power lifeboat capable of standing any weather and ready to put to sea at any hour of the day or night. In past years these little boats have rendered valuable assistance to fishermen, and saved many lives.

GRAPPLER INLET (formerly Grappler Creek), an arm of Banfield Inlet, was named after HM gunboat Grappler, three guns, 237 tons, which arrived at Esquimalt on July 12, 1860, being convoyed from England, in company with the gunboat Forward, by HMS Termagant. She was withdrawn from service in 1868 and sold by public auction to Captain Frain, for $2,400, and subsequently placed in the local coasting trade. On the night of April 29, 1883, the Grappler, Captain John F. Jagers, was destroyed by fire near Seymour Narrows, when a large number of persons, said to be 72, principally Chinese passengers on their way to the canneries, lost their lives.

For a time during the earlier period of the First World War, when this coast depended on Japan for its protection, one of that country's cruisers was based at Grappler Inlet, in readiness should one of the three German cruisers, then roaming the Pacific sea lanes, show up in these waters.

The natives who live in the Banfield area (there is only a handful of them left) are known as the Ohy-ahts. One of their principal villages was at Dodger's Cove, on Diana Island, across the channel from Banfield Inlet. The cove was named by Captain Richards, in 1861.

Returning to Victoria with Captain E. H. King, who had been despatched by the governor to investigate the wreck of the Florencia, which had occured a few miles beyond Ucluelet, the small schooner Saucy Lass put into a cove on Barkley Sound and lay there for several weeks "dodging the weather," during which time Captain Pamphlett, in the schooner Meg Merrilies, supplied them, on two occasions, with provisions. While lying there, Captain King was killed by the accidental discharge of his rifle while deer hunting

Shown a sketch of the place, which is a passage between two islands (Diana and King Edward), by the master of the Meg Merrilies, with the remark, "it is a fine place to dodge in." Richards replied: "That is so, and it will for ever be known as Dodger's Cove."

Diana Island was named after the steam tug Diana, 87 tons, which was purchased in San Francisco by Captain Stamp and used for towing the sailing vessels arriving and leaving Barkley Sound, to and from his sawmill. She afterwards carried the mail between Victoria, the San Juan Islands and the mainland, having a contract with the United States government. Old-time Victorians used to describe her as the "largest small steamer," or the "smallest large steamer" that ever ran in these waters.

The schooner Meg Merrilies, Captain Pamphlett, brought from Victoria the workmen engaged to build the Alberni mill.

Mrs. Barkley accompanied her husband throughout his two circumnavigations of the globe, starting her first voyage at the age of 17½ immediately after their marriage, which took place at the Protestant Chapel, Ostend, on Oct. 27, 1786. She died in 1843 and was buried at Enfield alongside her husband, who pre-deceased her in 1832.